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Title

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55m7m9gx>

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Publication Date

2011-12-01



**L.A. Rebellion:
Creating a New Black Cinema**

SYMPOSIUM REVIEW BY SAMANTHA NOELLE SHEPPARD

L.A. REBELLION: CREATING A NEW BLACK CINEMA



By the turn of the next century, film historians will recognize that a decisive turning point in the development of Black cinema took place at UCLA in the early 1970s. By then, persuasive definitions of Black cinema will revolve around images encoded not by Hollywood, but within the self-understanding of the African-American population.

– Clyde Taylor

Clyde Taylor, Professor Emeritus in the Gallatin School and Africana Studies at New York University, wrote these words in the program notes for his curated film series, *The L.A. Rebellion: A Turning Point in Black Cinema*, at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1986.

Thirty-five years later, serving as the keynote speaker at *L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema—Symposium*, which was co-organized by Allyson Nadia Field, Assistant Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA, and Jacqueline Stewart, Associate Professor of Radio/

Television/Film and African-American Studies at Northwestern University, Taylor's prescient words came into fruition as scholars, critics, filmmakers, and spectators convened at a one-day symposium dedicated to the profoundly enriching and enlightening cinematic history and legacy of the

L.A. Rebellion. Taylor, who is responsible for the name “L.A. Rebellion,” acutely diagnosed that in the late 1960s through the early 1980s at UCLA there was an unprecedented mix of socially, politically, and creative Black film artists committed to producing antiracist, alternative, and authentic cinematic depictions of Black peoples and experiences. These filmmakers include—but are not limited to—Barbara McCullough, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, Alile Sharon Larkin, Ben Caldwell, Zeinabu irene Davis, Billy Woodberry, Carroll Parrott Blue, Larry Clark, O. Funmilayo Makarah, and Jamaa Fanaka.

Taking place on Saturday, November 12, this one-day symposium was enveloped within the the L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema series, which opened October 7 and will end on December 17, at the UCLA Film & Television Archive’s Billy Wilder Theater at UCLA’s Hammer Museum. The film series is co-curated by Allyson Nadia Field, UCLA Film & Television Archive Director Jan-Christopher Horak, UCLA Film & Television Archive Head of Public Programs Shannon Kelly, and Jacqueline Stewart. The film series is also a part of the Getty Foundation’s groundbreaking Southern California city-wide art initiative, Pacific Standard Stewart

d Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980. Detailed on the official website of the film series, which is main-



Haile Gerima's *Ashes and Embers* (1982)

*from left to right, Michael T. Martin, Indiana University;
Clyde Taylor, NYU; filmmaker Monona Wali; and Jacqueline
Stewart, Northwestern University.*



tained by the Archive, the L.A. Rebellion movement's place in history is marked by "the vitality of its filmmakers, their utopian vision of a better society, their sensitivity to children and gender issues, their willingness to question any and all received wisdom, their identification with the liberation movements in the Third World, and their expression of Black pride and dignity."

The symposium featured two panels, a roundtable discussion, screenings of rare L.A. Rebellion-related film footage, and a short-films program, including Julie Dash's *Illusions* (1982), Gay Abel-Bey's *Fragrance* (1991); Larry Clark's *As Above, So Below* (1973); and the late Melvonna Ballenger's *Rain* (1978).

This magnificent scholarly and exhibitiv undertaking was generously sponsored by Dean Teri Schwartz and the School of Theater, Film and Television at UCLA; Dean Barbara O'Keefe and School of Communication at Northwestern University; Jan-Christopher Horak and the UCLA Film & Television Archive; Chair Barbara Boyle and the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media at UCLA; the Program in Moving Image Archive Studies at UCLA; CSW Director Kathleen McHugh and the Center for the Study of Women at UCLA; TFT's Elevate; and the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African-American Studies at UCLA. In acknowledging the supporters, Professor Field noted, "We are indebted to Kathleen McHugh and UCLA's Center for the Study



Gay Abel-Bey's *Fragrance* (1991)



We are indebted to Kathleen McHugh and the Center for the Study of Women for their cosponsorship and ongoing investment in promoting scholarly research related to issues of gender and sexuality. We are very proud that the film series features 25 films made by women. The key contribution of its women filmmakers is one of the defining aspects of the L.A. Rebellion

– Allyson Nadia Field

of Women for their cosponsorship and their ongoing investment in promoting scholarly research related to issues of gender and sexuality. We are very proud that the film series features 25 films made by women. The key contribution of its women filmmakers is one of the defining aspects of the L.A. Rebellion.”

The symposium was an exemplary scholarly engagement with the L.A. Rebellion’s innovative films; the filmmaker’s diverse and signature styles; and the social, cultural, and political contexts and concerns unique to their historical moment.

Bringing together scholars and critics to discuss the impressive and lasting impact of this film movement, which is notably still alive, and many of whose filmmakers are currently in various stages of production, the symposium began with a short film produced by UCLA directing graduate student Robyn Charles. Composed of excerpts from oral histories, which are currently being conducted by the Archive with the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, and footage from their respective films, the short film set both the celebratory tone and critical framework for the symposium. By opening with this screening

of the voices and visions of the L.A. Rebellion, the filmmakers provided a cogent entry point into discussing their history prior to, during, and after their time at UCLA.

Following the opening screening, Professor Field offered both a warm welcome and a succinct contextualization of the Archive’s “L.A. Rebellion Project.” “The most woefully neglected moments in American film history have been the L.A. Rebellion and the work of the filmmakers associated with it,” she explained. Rectifying this error, the project, which is three years in the making, has five major components. Field stated

that the first priority of the Archive is to locate filmmakers and film elements for preservation and to collect related papers and artifacts. Second, they are conducting oral histories, which will—and already has—provided invaluable information on the film movement. “Most evident has been that while we are focusing on the African and African-American filmmakers, the L.A. Rebellion was in fact highly collaborative and involved the contribution of filmmakers from diverse backgrounds. The Archive is therefore expanding its scope to locate and collect the work of Chicano, Asian-American, and Native American students who were at UCLA at the time,” Field stated.

The third component of the project is the three-month-long film exhibition, which runs until mid-December and will then travel nationally and internationally. Fourth, the Archive is providing greater access to the films, some of which have not been viewed in decades. Field stated that “in addition to striking new prints for circulation and archiving oral histories and papers for researchers, we have launched a comprehensive website for broader community access, and for students, researchers, and enthusiasts.” Lastly, the fifth component of the project will be the publication of *Emancipating the Image: The L.A. Rebellion of Black Filmmakers*, a volume to be coedited by Field, Horak, and Stewart. The title, Field explained, comes from a comment made during

L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Ben Caldwell’s oral history recording. In discussing his time at UCLA, Caldwell poetically articulated that he “ended up on the road of really seeing filmmaking as a way of emancipating the image.”

In following Field’s explanation of the aims of the preservation project, Professor Stewart gave insight into the life and career of a rarely discussed figure of the L.A. Rebellion, Professor Elyseo Taylor. Despite being relatively unknown to most scholars, Taylor had a profound and pronounced influence on creating the milieu of the L.A. Rebellion. A scholar, filmmaker, and captain in the U.S. Army, Taylor, Stewart explained, “sought to cultivate a film practice that would take up the fragments into which Black cultures, histories, and subjectivities had been broken by generations of oppression, and make them into something usable, something new.” The first Black faculty member at UCLA’s film school, Taylor played a key, foundational role in recruiting and mentoring students from under-represented groups.

“At UCLA, Elyseo Taylor was founding director of a program called Media Urban Crisis. MUC, for short, [which] brought Black, Chicano, Asian, and Native American into the Department’s MP/TV division, dramatically increasing its number of registered minority students,” said Stewart. Denied tenure, perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of Taylor’s time at UCLA is



From top to bottom: Jamaa Fanaka’s *Emma Mae* (1976), Larry Clark’s *Passing Through* (1977) and *As Above, So Below* (1973).



Zeinabu irene Davis's *Cycles* (1989)



Bernard Nicolas's *Daydream Therapy* (1977)

the film course “Film and Social Change” that he created. “Taught by his successor, renowned Third World film theorist Teshome Gabriel, until Professor Gabriel’s untimely death in June 2010,” Stewart notes that the course “continues to be an important part of the department’s curriculum.” In addition to putting into focus an unsung hero of the L.A. Rebellion, Stewart also showed a clip from one of Taylor’s films, a very early (and perhaps the very first) recording of a Kwanzaa cel-

ebration being led by Kwanzaa creator Maulana Karenga in Los Angeles in December of 1966.

For the symposium’s keynote address, an affected and inspiring Clyde Taylor spoke of the powerful resonance of the movement in cinema history. Heralding the lasting impact of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, Taylor explained that “the most powerful gain to be drawn from this work is the spectacle of Black people in full flight, as beings for themselves instead of fantasy beings

for others.” Offering humanistic representations, the L.A. Rebellion’s “fabulous cinematic liberation brought off with flair” is evident, he added, in their “refusal to answer the bell of Americanist expectations, thus releasing themselves of the burden of race, of the servile duty of otherness.” Taylor underscored the timeliness and timelessness of the L.A. Rebellion’s films. For him, “these films are still radioactive to the present cultural moment.” In his closing thoughts, Taylor left the

**Julie Dash, director of
Daughters of the Dust
(1991), makes a comment
from the audience.**



audience with a provocative statement, declaring, “It only took one black swan to disprove the myth that all swans were white. It only took one Black presidency to help us see that all the others were white presidencies. And it only takes one LA Rebellion...” Pausing before concluding both the statement and his talk, Taylor finished the poignant testimony with this cliffhanger: “I leave it to you to fill out the rest.” And that he did. In this regard, the symposium continued with scholars, critics, filmmakers, and audience members offering illuminating insight into the revelatory impact of the L.A. Rebellion, filling out (at least in part), as challenged, the rest of Taylor’s final statement.

Jan-Christopher Horak chaired the first panel of the day, “Black Film and Social Change: Representing Black Culture, Politics, and Labor Before and During the L.A. Rebellion.” David E. James, Professor at the School of Cinematic Arts at USC, spoke about the historical contexts and influences of the social movements prior to the L.A. Rebellion, particularly discussing the Black Power movement. Showing a clip from one the California Newsreel films, *Repression* (1969), James not only contextualized the social and cultural climate of the 1960s and 1970s, but he also put his finger on the one of the pressing social issues at the time, the gendered tensions and conflicts that marked (and marred) the Black Power movement.

Picking up on this thread, my presentation continued to discuss related issues of gender. In her presentation, I analyzed the role of affects in the L.A. Rebellion’s culture of production. Focusing on the material and immaterial labor of the filmmakers’ working bodies, she mobilized the industrial tenet “to affect and be affected by the world around them” as a way to understand the complexity of the representation of affects and female laboring bodies in Billy Woodberry’s *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984), Bernard Nicolas’s *Daydream Therapy* (1977), and Zeinabu irene Davis’s *Cycles* (1989).

Lastly, Jan-Christopher Horak discussed the relationship between Blaxploitation and the L.A. Rebellion. While Horak explained the particularities of the Blaxploitation movement that are in contrast to the work of the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, he highlighted the important discursive, aesthetic, and political connections between the film work produced in 1970s Hollywood and that happening at UCLA. While most of the movement filmmakers produced a counter aesthetic to the exploitative images of the Hollywood cycle, others, particularly Jamaa Fanaka, used the aesthetic styles connotated with Blaxploitation—for example in his films *Welcome Home Brother Charles* (1975), *Emma Mae* (1976), and *Penitentiary* (1979)—to provide a sharp political critique of the Black experience that is palatable yet poignant, and playful yet powerful.

Allyson Nadia Field chaired the second panel of the day, “Creating Black Film Style: Black Arts,

Music, and L.A. Rebellion Aesthetics.” In the first presentation, Danny Widener, Assistant Professor of History at UCSD, spoke of the roles of the arts in the African-American community and the role of artists as cultural and social historians. In discussing the trajectory of his book, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Duke University Press, 2010), Widener explained that “the world of the rebellion provided the entry point” into his understanding of the history of art and artists in Los Angeles. “To be a creative person is a revolutionary act,” Widener expounded, and the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers participated in this revolution by “taking us subjects of our own history, as active participants in our own life.”

In the second presentation, Morgan Woolsey, a doctoral student in Musicology at UCLA, gave an enlightening analysis on the role of music in the films of the L.A. Rebellion. Giving particular attention to Larry Clark’s *Passing Through* (1977), Woolsey argued that music is “an essential tool in the deconstruction and reconstruction of cinematic subjectivity, because music is well suited to represent and embody movement and change.” For Woolsey, “The music practices of the L.A. Rebellion spread music’s affective power across a proliferation of cinematic musical spaces, and encouraged an active and agentive identification with the journeys these films depict. What we can hear and sense in films like *Passing Through* is the attempt to reconstruct, humanely, humanistically,

Participants in the L.A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema symposium. *From left to right, back row, Ben Caldwell, Morgan Woolsey, Daniel Widener, Jan-Christopher Horak, David James, Robert Wheaton, Michael T. Martin, Jamaa Fanaka, Larry Clark; middle row, Chuck Kleinhans, Cauleen Smith, Julie Dash, Samantha Sheppard, Alile Sharon Larkin, Zeinabu irene Davis, Monona Wali, Abdosh Abdulhafiz, Charles Burnett; front row, Ed Guerrero, Jacqueline Stewart, Clyde Taylor, Allyson Nadia Field, and Gay Abel-Bey.*



Monona Wali



an emotional interiority systematically decimated in dominant filmmaking.”

The panel’s final presentation was given by Cauleen Smith, filmmaker and UCLA MFA alumna. Smith’s impassioned analysis of Clark’s *Passing Through* operated in harmony with Woolsey’s discussion on sound and music in the film. Smith explained that in *Passing Through*, “Clark uses light and sound in very similar fashions. Not only to enhance and describe narrative affect but to transmit abstracted knowledge and ideas that travel beyond the parameters of plot and narrative.” In addition to her semiotic analysis of the role of luminance and darkness in Clark’s film, Smith challenged the critical conversation on Black aesthetics to inject the issues of craft into its discussion. Here, she highlighted the problem of film stock selection for the shooting of Black skin. Smith explained how most Hollywood film stock, particularly Kodak, which was only tested against Caucasian skin, fails to render the array of tones of Black skin, making her favor Fuji film stock’s sensitivity to a range of tones. Smith concluded her dazzling discussion with a sharp critique of the role of gender and misogyny in Clark’s film, noting the role of the female presence as a trickster who disrupts space and time in the film as problematic to the film’s construction of Black subjectivity.

Jacqueline Stewart chaired the final roundtable discussion, “L.A. Rebellion: Then and Now,” which featured renowned scholars and critics, all of whom in the past three decades had previously written on the L.A. Rebellion. First, Ed Guerrero, Associate Professor of Cinema Studies and Africana Studies at New York University, reflected on the connections between Blaxploitation and the L.A. Rebellion. “I don’t see them as particularly antagonistic discourses,” he explains. Instead for Guerrero, they both “invoke the Black metaphor of call and response” and “they both arose out of same revolutionary circumstances at the time and they just took different paths.”

Next, Chuck Kleinhans, Associate Professor Emeritus of Radio/Television/Film at Northwestern University and JumpCut coeditor, focused on both the cinematic influences, such as Black directors Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams and Third World Cinema, and the social and political influences, such as the Black Arts Movement and the role of identity politics. He also addressed the “after” of the L.A. Rebellion, examining what has happened since the 1980s for these filmmakers. Kleinhans also brought into relief the economic realities and financial burdens attached to the movement and its filmmakers in their post-UCLA careers. Lastly, Kleinhans commissioned scholars to look at the other mediums in which the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers have

worked—particularly video and television—for new areas of study and analysis.

In following, Michael T. Martin, Director of the Black Film Center/Archives and Professor of Communication and Culture and American Studies at Indiana University, discussed the lineage of the L.A. Rebellion, which he argues “can be tracked back to 1918 and the Birth of a Race,” the first film that offered an alternative cinema vision of history and the Black experience. In addition, Martin provided a rudimentary framework in which to understand the context and concerns of the L.A. Rebellion. In this schematic, he describes the group’s central concerns and the narratives; their theoretical assumptions that at least initially informed their practices, “especially in regards to Black audiences and the African American community”; their innovations and subversion of filmic codes and conventions and contributions to Black aesthetics; and the group’s activities in relation to parallel film, literary, and other cultural movements.

Successively, Clyde Taylor added to his keynote address, reflecting on a question posed by a member of the audience about where Black film is currently going. Taylor explicated his desire for a need for a vision of the future.

Lastly, Monona Wali, filmmaker and UCLA MFA alumna, discussed her experiences as a graduate student peer of many L.A. Rebellion filmmakers. Born in Benares, India, Wali ex-

plained that she felt a strong connection with the African-American and women graduate students at UCLA. Following her desire to want to publicize and spread the work of her peers, whom she found profoundly inspiring, Wali wrote about them on several occasions, including an article on Charles Burnett for *The Independent: Film & Video Monthly*. Prior to the roundtable discussion, a brief excerpt of Wali interviewing L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Barbara McCullough on the weekly cable view program was screened. Wali explained that “many of us have gone on to become teachers,” explaining to the audience how the work of the L.A. Rebellion continues on in many ways and forms, including “teaching and reaching younger generations” in and beyond the theater.

The symposium co-organizers and panelists did an excellent job of providing a context and conversation around the L.A. Rebellion films and filmmakers. After both panels and the roundtable discussion, there were wonderfully engaging and thought-provoking Q&A sessions. Of particular note, after the roundtable discussion, a spirited and fluid conversation sprang to life among panelists, audience members, and the many L.A. Rebellion filmmakers who attended the symposium. With theory and theorist meeting praxis and producers, the specialness of this critical exchange cannot be underestimated. The converging and diverging viewpoints produced a harmony of intellectually invigorating analyses on the L.A. Rebellion’s influence on the creation of a new Black cinema.

Samantha Noelle Sheppard is a doctoral candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA. Recipient of the Eugene V. Cota Robles Fellowship, her dissertation is titled “Sporting Bodies, Displaying History: Black Embodiment and Performance in Contemporary Sport and Hip Hop Dance Films.”

Credits: Image on page 4 is from *Passing Through* by Larry Clark; photos on pages 5, 7, 12, 14, 15 by Todd Cheney, UCLA Photography.